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ABSTRACT

A study examined the family communication of two television families: the Huxtables, on "The Cosby Show," and the Simpsons. Content analysis was used to analyze communication behaviors in 9 episodes of "The Cosby Show" and 12 episodes of "The Simpsons," and behaviors were coded as to type of communication. Results showed that: (1) both families exhibited primarily affiliative (rather than conflictual) communication behaviors; (2) in the Huxtable family, communication was child/parent centered, while it was spouse/parent centered in the Simpson family; (3) child/parent communication was the most affiliative in both families, while communication between spouses was the most conflictual in the Huxtable family and in the Simpson family sibling dyads were the most conflictual; (4) on both shows, the predominant communication behavior was giving information, followed closely on "The Simpsons" by attacking; and (5) on the Cosby Show, parents and children exchanged information while spouses opposed; on "The Simpsons" the most common communication types were giving directions between parents and children, giving support between parents, and attacking among siblings. Results indicated that both families were positive and supportive in their family communication behaviors. Comparison with B.S. Greenberg's 1980 study concerning families on primetime television showed that several stereotypical communication patterns were no longer present. The communication patterns can serve as models for social learning. (Four tables of data are included; 30 references are attached.) (SR)

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Family Communication Models on Television: The Simpsons and The Cosby Show

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Concern continues for the health and well-being of the American family. The nuclear family appears to have disintegrated, inasmuch as two-thirds of our children live in a family configuration which differs from the nuclear family (MacDonald, 1989). These changes in the structure of the family are associated with increases in deviant behavior in adolescents ("Youngsters lose way," 1986). And while some researchers suggest that there is evidence that the long decline in the condition of the American family may be ending (Schmitt, 1991), our family problems are not yet over. For example, the number of babies born to unwed mothers has risen from 18% of births in 1980 to 26% in 1988 ("Births to unwed moms," 1991).

Television is seen as an influence on family life, not only in that television viewing has become a dominant activity of families, but because television families serve as models for behavior in real life families. The explanation of this influence is rooted in social learning theory.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977) theory explains that one learns new behaviors not only by actually performing those behaviors, but also by observation of others' performances. In many instances it is not necessary to engage in repetitive trial

and error processes in order to acquire a sizeable repertoire of patterns of behavior. Television provides a rich source of behaviors to observe and from which to learn, and many have concluded that television can be a potent resource for social learning (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986; Gunter, 1984; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Watkins, 1985). Singer, Singer and Rapaczynsi, for example, note that television is "as much a potential source of influence as the home environment, the parents' behavioral style, and their socioeconomic milieu" (1984, p. 73).

While the results of research do not unequivocally support the theory, a large body of both experimental and nonexperimental research does support it. Dorr (1986), for instance, cites several examples of experimental research which typically followed a pattern in which the experimental subjects viewed a violent film clip, the control subjects viewed a neutral film clip and observations of later behavior indicated that the experimental subjects exhibited more aggressive behavior than the control subjects.

A number of nonexperimental studies also support the theory. Panel studies, for example, follow a population of subjects over time and correlate the viewing of violent television with aggressive behavior. These studies indicate

a positive relationship between viewing violent television programming and aggressive behavior (Dorr, 1986). Although the results have not been universally supportive, Dorr notes that "there is, by now, conclusive evidence that television content can affect children's information, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 69).

Studies of imitated behaviors are not limited to studies of aggression. Chesebro (1987), for example, has observed that values embedded in television programming are important models for viewers. Pearl, Bouthilet, and Lazar conclude that the behaviors in "television families almost certainly influence viewers' thinking about real-life families (1982, p. 70). Others have also concluded that television families are used by viewers as models for their own behavior in families (Greenberg, 1980; Kalter, 1988; Stroman, 1984). In another example, Greenfield notes that when Fonzie applied for a library card on Happy Days there was "a five-fold increase in the number of children applying for library cards in the United States" (1984, p. 48). Thus, as Jeffres concludes, "the overwhelming majority of social scientists would respond without hesitation that TV exerts a powerful impact on children's perceptions and their imitative learning" (1986, p. 213).

Interaction Patterns in Television Families

Noting the salience of Bandura's theory, McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn and Fallis (1982) are among several writing in the National Institute of Health report calling for research which describes the interaction patterns between family members in television families. They express concern about the potential impact of these interactions as models for general interpersonal communication as well as for family interactions.

Content analyses of television family interaction patterns are scarce, however. Greenberg and his associates (1980) conducted a comprehensive analysis of television content during the 1975-78 television seasons. In their analysis of family interaction patterns, they conclude that most interactions reflect stereotypical family roles: husband gives direction to wife; wife seeks support from husband; mothers do not oppose and attack; children petition; parents petition least; mothers direct; wives and children do not direct; the primary communicators are husband/wife pairs (Greenberg, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Neuendorf & Atkin, 1980; Greenberg, Hines, Buerkel-Rothfuss & Atkin, 1980). Additionally, they report that 88 percent of all family interactions were positive, constructive ones, and

that conflict was concentrated in husband/wife pairs, and pairs which include a brother.

In an analysis of parenting behaviors on television, Dail and Way (1985) conclude that during the 1982 season television fathers were expressive and nurturing and also more active parents than mothers, and noted the importance of these behaviors as models for real life behavior.

Two analyses of sibling behaviors on television found that while the interactions were primarily positive, compared to the analysis of Greenberg et al., they were remarkably conflictual. The sibling interactions in The Cosby Show, Family Ties, and Growing Pains were 58% positive, compared to 87% positive in the study of family interaction in the 1975-76 season (Larson, 1989). A second study, of television siblings from the 1950s family sitcoms of Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, and Ozzie and Harriet, found that those sibling interactions were 65% positive and 35% negative, also quite different from the report on the 1975-76 season (Larson, 1991, in press).

Skill and Wallace (1990) have recently reported on power interactions in primetime television families. They conclude that, in general, more family communicative acts were positive than negative, and that intact families were

more harmonious than were non-intact or mixed families. They observed that the communication behaviors of brothers were disharmonious, and that sisters/daughters were relatively inconsequential to the family power structure.

To summarize, the portrayal of family interaction on television from the 1950s to the late 1980s has been primarily positive. Interaction patterns have tended to reflect stereotypical patterns in which parents give directions, children accept directions, parents and spouses give support and children accept support. Conflict which does occur has seemed to be concentrated in spousal and sibling relationships, with brothers being notably conflictual in their communication behaviors. Sisters and daughters have been relatively inconsequential as family communicators. Fathers have recently been portrayed less stereotypically as especially nurturing, expressive parents.

Purpose

The purpose of the study reported here is to describe the family communication of two specific television families--the Huxtables, on The Cosby Show, and the Simpsons. These families were specifically chosen for two reasons. One is because of the popularity of the programs (with both adults and children) on which they are featured,

suggesting that they have widespread influence as model families. The second reason is because of the striking difference in the responses to these two families. The Simpsons have been described as part of the "squalid underbelly of domestic life" and a "grungy, bickering lot" (Zoglin, 1990). Gerard (1990) described them as a "contentious working-class bunch" similar to the families on Roseanne and Married. . .With Children. On the other hand, the Huxtables have been described as "the ideal family. . .they deal effectively with their problems within the family" (Spires, 1990). Cliff and Clair Huxtable have been identified as models to imitate if you want to become a better parent (Brothers, 1989).

Thus, the following research questions guided the study of these two television families:

1. What is the proportion of affiliative and conflictual communication?

2. What family roles dominate the communication flow?

3. Which family roles are most affiliative and conflictual?

4. What types of communication dominate in each family?

5. What types of communication dominate in the various family roles?

6. In the parent/child family role, are there differences in communication patterns between mixed-gender and same-gender dyads?

Method

Nine episodes of The Cosby Show from the 1986-87 season and twelve episodes of The Simpsons from the 1990 season were analyzed. Inasmuch as The Cosby Show is available in syndication in most markets, those episodes continue to regularly be seen, and the family at that time had its original configuration of parents, Cliff and Clair Huxtable, and five children: Sondra, Denise, Theo, Vanessa, and Rudy. The Simpson family consists of parents Homer and Marge and three children: Bart, Lisa and Maggie (who does not speak, but communicates infrequently by sucking on her pacifier). The episodes were taped and transcribed in order to facilitate coding of program material.

A communication behavior was operationally defined as a verbal or nonverbal message directed from one family member to another. One behavior ended and another began when the communicator changed or when the type of communication

content changed. In all, 1,870 behaviors from The Cosby Show and 1,670 behaviors from The Simpsons were coded.

Each behavior was coded as as to the sender and receiver of the message. This was most frequently a dyad (e.g., Cliff/Theo). However, on The Simpsons there were a number of instances in which a family member addressed more than one family member or the family as a group, or an unidentifiable member addressed another member. These pairings were coded as e.g., Homer/family or family/Homer, etc. The communication behaviors were also coded as to the family role the dyad reflected (e.g. parent/child).

Then, using a the method developed by Greenberg et al. (1980), each behavior was coded for type. There were eleven types of communication:

1. Offering information
2. Seeking information
3. Contributing and entertaining--including phatic communication
4. Supporting, reinforcing
5. Petitioning, requests for support
6. Directing, giving instructions
7. Accepting support, being grateful
8. Accepting direction, following instructions

9. Opposing, disagreeing

10. Attacking, criticizing, being sarcastic

11. Evading

Intercoder reliability levels between the primary coder and two others was above .88, using Holsti's formula (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991).

Results

Affiliative and Conflictual Communication

With regard to the proportion of affiliative interactions compared to conflictual interactions, the first eight types of communication were considered affiliative and the last three types were considered conflictual. Overall, in both families the communication was overhwelmingly affiliative (See Table 1), although significantly more

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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communication was affiliative in the Huxtable family compared to the Simpsons.

Predominance of Family Roles

The second research question concerned the dominance of various family roles. In the Huxtable family, more than 60% of the total communication was from child to parent and

parent to child (See Table 2). In the Simpson family, more communication was initiated by parents, either as

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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communication between spouses or from parent to child. While the reason for the differences may well lie in the fact that there are five Huxtable children and only three Simpson children, the result is a child/parent centered portrayal of the Huxtables and a spouse/parent centered portrayal of the Simpsons.

Affiliative and Conflictual Communication and Family Roles

In the Huxtable family, not only was the child/parent dyad the most prevalent, it was also the most affiliative, with 89% of the communication being affiliative (See Table 3). Of all the child/parent dyads,[2] the Theo/Cliff dyad had the greatest proportion of affiliative communication at 90%.

Insert Table 3 About Here

The most conflictual dyad in the Huxtable family was between spouses with communication between Clair and Cliff 38% conflictual and from Cliff to Clair, 33% conflictual.

On The Simpsons, the child parent dyad was also the most affiliative (79%), with communication between Lisa and Marge having the greatest proportion of positive communication (92%). Bart's communication to his parents was also primarily affiliative at 81% positive to Marge and 80% positive to Homer. The sibling dyads were most conflictual with Bart's communication to Lisa 47% conflictual and Lisa's to Bart 45% conflictual.

Communication Types

Another research question concerned the types of communication behaviors which were predominant (See Table 4). On The Cosby Show clearly the most common type of communication was giving information. On The Simpsons

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Insert Table 4 About Here

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this type also predominated, followed closely by attacking. The most frequent Huxtable pairs giving information were children to parents. Often this was given in response to a question by parents about a child's duties, activities or problems. The primary Huxtable children giving information to parents were Theo (n = 76) and Rudy (n = 42).

On The Simpsons the primary information givers were spouses. Between them, Homer gave information to Marge (n = 37) slightly more often than Marge to Homer (n = 32). A common occurrence would be Homer describing to Marge an incident at work at the nuclear plant. Attacking behavior in the Simpson family was fairly evenly distributed between all family roles except child/parent. Within specific dyads, Marge directed more attacking and criticism toward Homer (n = 38) than any other partner in a dyad. Between siblings, nearly equal amounts of attacking communication was directed by Bart to Lisa (n = 33) as by Lisa toward Bart (n = 32).

Family Roles and Types of Communication

With regard to patterns of communication between various family pairs, on The Cosby Show the primary form of communication engaged in by parents with children was asking for information, closely followed by giving information (See Table 4). Cliff Huxtable was by far the more active parent in both asking for information (n = 96; Clair, n = 13) and giving information (n = 85; Clair, n = 8).

The predominant communication type between spouses was to oppose. Of the spouses Clair opposed Cliff (n = 31) far more frquently than Cliff opposed Clair (n = 11). For

siblings, opposition was also the most common communication type.

Between children and parents, in the Huxtable family, giving information was the most frequent communication type.

On The Simpsons the most common communication type between parents and children was giving directions, and Homer gave directions (n = 50) more than twice as often as Marge (n = 21). Homer's directions were primarily to Bart (n = 45), while Marge directed Lisa (n = 7) as well as Bart (n = 13). Children were the primary followers of directions, and most of those were Bart following Homer's directions (n = 20).

Between Simpson spouses, the most frequent type of communication was giving support. This is quite different from the Huxtable spouses, who primarily opposed. Marge was more supportive of Homer (n = 48) than Homer of Marge (n = 29).

Between siblings, the primary communication type was attacking, and nearly equal amounts of attacking communication was directed by Bart to Lisa as by Lisa toward Bart. (Maggie is not discussed inasmuch as she communicated a total of only 17 times.)

With regard to communication between children and parents, giving information was the most frequent type and both Bart and Lisa communicated information to parents approximately equally as frequently. However, all of Bart's information to parents was directed to Homer, while Lisa gave information equally as frequently to Marge as to Homer.

Discussion

Before discussing results, an important limitation should be noted, that this is an analysis of program content only. It is a description of the models of family communication behavior available on two popular television families. For any number of reasons, real life family members may or may not be influenced by the behaviors they see on television. An important further step is to conduct cultivation analysis in order to assess the degree to which these programs actually do affect viewers.

With this limitation in mind, it is apparent that while there are expected differences in these two families, the differences are not as extreme as one might expect. These families are both overwhelmingly positive and supportive in their family communication behaviors.

In terms of more specific patterns of behavior, it is useful to discuss these two families in light of the

patterns described by Greenberg (1980) concerning families on primetime television in the 1975-78 seasons.

Mothers Direct Behavior

This pattern did not occur in either of the television families under study here. Although in both families directing was done by parents, it is done by fathers. In the Huxtable family Cliff did virtually all of the directing (n = 76) compared to Clair (n = 3). In the Simpson family the pattern was not as striking, but Homer (n = 50) directed children twice as frequently as Marge (n = 25).

Parents and Spouses Give Support

The two families offer different patterns of offering support. In the Huxtable family, the parent/child pair was the primary pattern of supportive communication (48%), while support between spouses made up only 14.5% of the supportive communication.

In the Simpson family, supportive communication was fairly equally divided between the parent/child pair (30%) and between spouses (31%). Thus, the Simpson family pattern more closely resembles the pattern described by Greenberg.

Mothers Oppose Least

This pattern also exists in the two families studied here. Of the parental attack and opposition in the Huxtable family, Cliff accounted for 86% of it and Clair 14%.

Marge Simpson was more aggressive than Clair Huxtable, though not as aggressive as Homer Simpson. She accounted for 32% of the attacking and opposing behavior; Homer 68%.

Parents Interact with Same-Sexed Children

This pattern was apparent only in the father/son dyad of the Huxtables. The Cliff/Theo dyad (n = 242) was more dominant than Cliff with any daughter. There was no mother/daughter dyad with similar frequencies. In the Simpson family, Bart received the greatest frequency of communication behaviors from both parents (Homer/Bart=215; Marge/Bart = 75; Marge/Lisa = 35).

Children Petition for Support from Parents

This pattern of communication was exhibited in the Huxtable family (59.4%), while in the Simpson family 25.2% of the petitioning behavior was from children directed to parents and 30.1% of that behavior was between spouses.

Husbands Direct Wives

This pattern did not exist in either of the television families studied here. In both families wives directed

husbands (Clair/Cliff n = 7; Marge/Homer n = 24) more frequently than husbands directed wives (Cliff/Clair n = 5; Homer/Marge n = 10).

Wives Seek Support from Husbands

This is another pattern which was not exhibited in either family studied. In both instances, husbands sought support from wives (Cliff/Clair n = 11; Homer/Marge n = 35) more frquently than wives sought support from husbands (Clair/Cliff n = 3; Marge/Homer n = 13).

Spouses are Most Interactive Dyad

This pattern also is not exhibited in either family. In the Huxtable family, just 13.4% of the communication was between spouses, while in the Simpson family 26.6% was between spouses. This may well reflect the differences in configuration of families portrayed on television. During the seventies, few adolescent or pre-adolescent characters were portrayed in families, perhaps accounting for less interaction among roles other than spouses. Whatever the cause, the present portrayal does suggest that children have become more influential in families than they were previously. Indeed, the study comparing 1950s and 1980s television siblings (Larson, in press) noted that 1950s adolescent and preadolescent children did not account for

nearly as much communication in television families as 1980s children.

Spouses are Most Conflictual

On The Cosby Show the communication between spouses was the most conflictual dyad (35.9%), while on The Simpsons the sibling dyads were the most conflictual (41.8%).

In sum, with regard to the portrayal of families on television during the seventies, both the Huxtables and the Simpsons display communication behaviors which are different fromn seventies television families in many ways. The image of mothers/wives is very different--they do less directing and are willing to oppose children. They are also willing to be much moe independent from their husbands, being neither the primary followers of directions nor seekers of support from their husbands.

Conversely, the portrayal of fathers in the Huxtable and Simpson families reflects the more nurturing patterns earlier described by Dail and Way (1985). Both Cliff and Homer are active fathers, giving direction and offering support to their children. Cliff did virtually all of the directing of children (Cliff n = 76; Clair n = 3) and offered support nearly four times more often than Clair (Cliff n = 59; Clair n = 15). Homer gave directions to

children more than twice as often as Marge (Homer n = 50; Marge n = 21), and offerd much more support as well (Homer n = 40; Marge n = 30).

Further, given the proportions of interactions, children seem to have evolved as more important players in families.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent that these families actually have quite a lot in common. They both exhibit primarily affiliative communication behaviors, and in many ways have evolved beyond the stereotypical family communication patterns evident in the seventies. Indeed, as models for social learning, the communication patterns exhibited are remarkably diverse in terms of both the distribution of the types of communication and the absence of stereotypical communication patterns between family roles.

Footnotes

1. Complete definitions and additional coding information is available from the author.

2. Complete data pertaining to each dyad is available on request.

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Table 1

Affiliative and Conflictual Communication

	Affiliative	Conflictual
The Cosby Show		
(n = 1870)	77.9	22.1
The Simpsons		
(n = 1670)	71.8	28.2

χ^2 (1, N = 3540) = 16.95, p <.01.

Table 2

Communication by Family Role

	Cosby Show	Simpsons
Parent/Child	32.5% (n = 607)	24.7% (n = 413)
Child/Parent	30.8% (n = 576)	20.8% (n = 348)
Spouse	13.4% (n = 251)	26.6% (n = 444)
Sibling	23.3% (n = 436)	16.0% (n = 268)
Other*	____	11.8% (n = 197)

*This reflects Simpson dyads which were coded e.g. Homer/family or Family/Bart, when the member was addressing the family as a group, or when several members addressed one member.

Table 3

Family Role Interactions by Direction

	Affiliative	Conflictual
All roles		
The Cosby Show*		
(n = 1870)	77.9	22.1
The Simpsons**		
(n = 1670)	71.8	28.2
Parent/Child		
The Cosby Show	77.8	22.2
The Simpsons	77.7	22.3
Child/Parent		
The Cosby Show	89.4	10.6
The Simpsons	79.3	20.7
Spouse		
The Cosby Show	64.1	35.9
The Simpsons	69.1	30.9

Table 3 (continued)

Sibling		
The Cosby Show	70.6	29.3
The Simpsons	58.2	41.8
Other* **		
The Cosby Show	___	___
The Simpson	70.6	29.4

*χ^2 (3, N = 1870) = 85.151, p <.01.

**χ^2 (4, N = 1670) = 42.995, p <.01. Tabled values represent percentages; group n's are in parentheses.

***This category reflects the Simpson dyads which were from one family member to the whole family, or from an unknown family member or several family members to a member.

Table 4

Family Role Interactions by Type

	Parent/ Child	Child/ Parent	Spouse	Sib.	Other*
Gives information					
The Cosby Show**					
(n = 399; 21.3%)	23.3	46.4	11.3	19.1	___
The Simpsons***					
(n = 268; 16.1%)	20.2	23.1	25.4	14.6	16.8
Seeks information					
TheCosby Show					
(n = 237; 12.7%)	46.0	17.7	12.2	24.1	____
The Simpsons					
(n = 133; 8.0%)	30.1	21.1	24.1	14.3	10.5
Contributes					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 177; 9.5%)	38.4	32.2	14.7	14.7	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 99; 5.9%)	24.2	29.3	19.2	19.2	8.1

Table 4 (cont.)

Supports					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 159; 8.5%)	47.8	17.6	14.5	20.1	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 239; 14.3%)	31.0	21.0	32.6	9.2	6.3
Petitions					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 175; 9.4%)	8.6	59.4	8.0	24.0	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 163; 9.8%)	14.1	25.2	30.1	16.0	14.7
Directs					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 157; 8.4%)	50.3	11.5	7.6	30.6	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 186; 11.1%)	44.6	11.3	18.3	11.3	14.5
Accepts support					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 46; 2.5%)	21.7	43.5	15.2	19.6	___
(n = 44; 2.6%	25.0	27.3	36.4	2.3	9.1

Table 4 (cont.)

Accepts direction					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 107; 5.7%)	20.6	57.0	5.6	16.8	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 65; 3.9%)	16.9	50.8	16.9	12.3	3.1
Oppose					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 238; 12.7%)	28.6	16.0	18.0	37.4	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 205; 12.3%)	15.6	20.5	32.2	23.9	7.8
Attack					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 163; 8.7%)	40.5	11.0	25.8	22.7	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 258; 15.5%)	23.6	11.6	24.0	24.4	16.3

Table 4 (cont.)

Evades					
The Cosby Show					
(n = 12; 0.6%)	8.3	41.7	33.3	16.7	___
The Simpsons					
(n = 10; 0.6%))	___	___	90.0	10.0	___

*This column represents Simpson dyads which were coded as a family member to the family as a group, or more than one member to a single member.

**χ^2 (30, N = 1870) = 356.101, p <.01.

***χ^2 (40, N = 1670) = 208.685, p <.01. Tabled values represent percentages; group n's are in parentheses.